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Author(s): Elmer G. Suhr

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An Interpretation of the Unicorn

by ELMER G. SUHR

THE unicorn, one of the most fabulous of all hybrid creatures, has appealed to the imagination as much as the dragon, from the early days of civilization to our own time. Not as old as the dragon, its features are not as ugly or repulsive. It has been traced (not very persuasively) to various species of animal, it has been linked vaguely to the heavens, it has found its way into legend, saga, allegory, even into the symbolism of the messiah. In each case, the explanations for its function in any one of these settings have never met with the approval of any number of scholars. Its most significant attributes include, first of all, the single horn, which is frequently spiralled, the speed of its action, its solitary habits and the colours ascribed to its body and horn. Like the dragon it is ambivalent in character: it can be very gentle and bestow a number of benefits; it can also be the most ferocious of adversaries. Here we are not concerned with all its many manifestations in various areas of the past but with those salient features which may lead us to a tentative and probable interpretation.

We begin with the unicorn of the British Royal Coat of Arms where he is furnished with the body of a horse, the legs and hoofs of a deer, the beard of a goat, a long, grooved horn projecting from his forehead and the tail of a lion.[1] Even in our own century we are told that the horn is a symbol of the unity of the divine Father and his Son,[2] but no one has ventured to establish a symbolic common denominator between the horn and divinity. He appears somewhat like a belligerent horse rearing before the lion, his neck arched, tail in the air, prepared to hurl the full strength of his body behind the horn's thrust. The whole attitude seems to be patterned after that of a horse coping with an enemy from the front, although the

[1] A. C. Fox-Davies, *A Complete Guide to Heraldry*, New York, 1909, p. 222, fig. 417. C. G. E. Bunt (*Antiquity*, IV, 1930, p. 425f.) traces the two animals in such a pattern back to Persia and Mesopotamia.

[2] C. W. Scott-Giles, *The Romance of Heraldry*, London and Toronto, 1929, p. 174. The origin of the unicorn as a Scottish emblem is uncertain.

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horse frequently disposes of his victim with his hind hoofs. The unicorn, so far as I know, never meets an enemy with raised hind legs. From the standpoint of naturalism, this heraldic unicorn and his immediate antecedents of the Middle Ages and Renaissance approximate an equine form more closely than his forebears of ancient times. His position here over against the lion of heraldry apparently has no significance beyond national symbolism.[3]

We are not directly concerned with the illustrations of the unicorn in the literature and art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance except for the light they may throw on his origin. The claim that the animal could only be captured or killed with the aid of a virgin as decoy,[4] along with the reports of travellers in the east may be found in the work of Odell Shepard.[5] One or two examples we must mention: on a medallion by Pisanello[6] we find the unicorn in the form of a fleecy goat whose horn is decidedly grooved. The docile animal, one foot thrust forward, has evidently been pacified by the maid seated nearby. Above is the crescent of the moon. The fleece of the ram or goat had a definite connection with the spinning Aphrodite functioning on the level of the moon;[7] after reviewing a number of theories Shepard (p. 243) concludes that the unicorn's connection with the moon is 'not a theory but a fact'.

On the other hand, another version, likewise on a medallion,[8] shows an equine unicorn turning his head sideward and upward to look at the sun above; on his back rests a treasure chest surmounted by a crown. The latter object seems to point to a con-

[3] One ancestor of this heraldic grouping may have included a column of the cosmos or a cosmic tree, standing upright between the two animals. A miniature in a prayer book of a synagogue in Poland shows the lion and unicorn guarding the tree of life (Z. Ameisenowa, *JWarb*, II, 1939, p. 344). There is no reason, as we shall see later, why these two creatures should not co-operate as well as contend against each other in a cosmic enterprise.

[4] This account may have its roots in the figure of Artemis as mistress of the animals (Aeschylus, *Agamem.*, 145–50). The Gorgon plate in the British Museum (*JHS*, 1885, Pl. 59; E. Buschor, *Greek Vase-Painting*, London, 1921, Pl. XXX, fig. 59) presents the goddess with a Medusa face, and the Medusa has an origin similar to that of the unicorn which is merely a later development. Another line of influence may come from such tales as that of Claudia Quintia (A. B. Cook, *Zeus*, III, p. 895).

[5] *The Lore of the Unicorn*, London, 1930, p. 47f. He also gives particulars about its identification with the whale (p. 253f.).

[6] G. Habich, *Die Medaillen der italienischen Renaissance*, Stuttgart, 1923, Pl. VII, 2; Shepard, Pl. XX.

[7] See my *Venus de Milo — The Spinner*, New York, 1958, pp. 67–8.

[8] G. F. Hill, *A Corpus of Italian Medals of the Renaissance before Cellini*, London, 1930, Pl. 69, 385. Here the horn is again grooved.

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nection between kingship and the sun. The fact that the moon is not visible need not disturb us. The Renaissance seems to have realized, in some vague way, that the unicorn had something to do with both the moon and the sun without being able to establish a link between the three. Water-conning is another feature of the unicorn's activity[9] which may help to explain the meaning of the horn.[10]

One of the most singular of all unicorns is the Tahish[11] of South Arabia, in the mountains of Yemen. He has a strange way of hiding out in the hills during the day, but in the night he roams abroad and is a frightful beast to meet on the road. His hide is impervious to knife or bullet, in fact there is but one method of dealing with him effectively: from his forehead there grows, not a horn, but a hair about a yard in length which, if seized and torn out, will incapacitate the beast for the balance of his days. Most of his features are those of a horse, except for luminous eyes, a lion's tail and sharp tusks projecting from the corners of his mouth. He also has a great respect for virgins and people with a good moral record. The hair of his forehead, magical in its properties, confers on the owner invulnerability and omniscience in war, attributes we also find associated with the messiah.

In general, the unicorn is considered as a composite animal, with equine features predominating, and much sought after by hunters. He can, on the one hand, be a fierce fighter against other animals, even with his own kind; he can also be one of the most gentle of four-footed creatures. His horn has special miraculous powers, the most significant being its ability to purify water; it

[9] G. F. Hill, *op. cit.*, Pl. 19, 82. Here the unicorn awkwardly bends his horn at a sharp angle to contact the water.

[10] R. Ettinghausen, (*The Unicorn-Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers* I, 3, Washington, 1950) (has made an excellent study of the Muslim version, the Karkadann. The rhinoceros evidently played a major role in its makeup and reputation. He is ferocious in his relations with other animals (p. 29) and will even hunt and kill the human being (p. 35), although he can be pacified (p. 47). He is the rarest of animals (p. 52), roaming over a wide area. The antlers of the stag (p. 18) play a role in the development of the horn, one version having a single horn with forty-two hollow branches (p. 64). The story of the virgin subduing the beast also occurs (p. 60). The same writer (*Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend Jr.*, Princeton, 1955, p. 286) claims the tradition goes back to the legend of the young hermit in the *Mahabharata*. Interesting to note is that E. Topsell (*The Elizabethan Zoo*, London, 1926, p. 85) will not include the rhinoceros in the category of the unicorns, although he admits (p. 86) that it also shows a weakness for virgins.

[11] R. A. B. Hamilton, *Folklore*, 54, 1943, p. 261–2.

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could also serve as a prophylactic and a cure for various ailments; it could even be used to whiten the teeth.[12] The animal is most selective about the food it eats, very cautious and evasive, and seldom caught in a snare or brought down by a hunter's weapon. One effective means of capture was to trick the animal into piercing a tree trunk with its horn, a ruse which rendered it a captive to its own weapon.[13] No writer gives us a detailed description of it, nor does anyone question how a creature with so many features borrowed from other animals could run or fight effectively; no one makes an attempt to explain why the horn is grooved. Like so many other animals, mythical or otherwise, it has been the subject of a number of allegorical interpretations, the most important being religious: it stands for the union of Christ with the Father.[14]

Let us now turn our attention to the statements of the ancients, some of which merely repeat what we have already mentioned; we include only what will contribute to a significant interpretation.

Ctesias,[15] the Greek physician at the Persian court, reports that the unicorn's body is white, the head is dark red, the eyes dark blue; the base of the horn is white, the upper part crimson, the middle section black.[16] He refers to the animal as the wild ass of India, capable of outrunning the common ass, the horse or stag. He also comments on the healing properties of the horn. Aelian[17] also informs us about the wild ass of India, white in colour except for the head which is very near to purple, the eyes dark blue. For the horn he gives the same colours as Ctesias. The people of India drink from such a horn around which they lay rings of gold. He dwells on the strength of the horn, the ferocity of the animal's kick

[12] E. Topsell, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

[13] The ruse even appears in the tales of Grimm (J. Bolte and G. Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder und Hausmaerchen der Brueder Grimm*, II, Leipzig, 1915, p. 21). This motive seems to be connected with that of the sword piercing a rock or tree.

[14] F. J. Carmody, *Physiologus Latinus*, Paris, 1939, XVI; cf. R. Reinsch, *Le Bestiaire: Das Tierbuch des normanischen Dichters Guillaume le Clerc*, Leipzig, 1892, p. 284f.

[15] *Frag. Ctesiae Cnidii* (ed. C. Mueller), 79. Of course, he knows the animal only by hearsay.

[16] The painter Luini represented the unicorn with a white body and a black horn (*JWarb*, XVII, 1954, p. 275, Pl. 36d). The same three colours are mentioned by Dante, *Purgatorio*, IX, 94–102. Cf. the black of the raven, the white of the snow and the red of the blood in Celtic tradition (A. Nutt, *Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail — Folklore Society Publications*, 1888, No. XXIII, p. 137).

[17] *De nat. animal.*, IV, 52.

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and bite and its inedible flesh. Elsewhere[18] he refers to a one-horned animal of India called the Cartazonus, of the size of a horse with a reddish mane, uncloven hoofs and the tail of a pig; the horn, black in colour,[19] is sharp and equipped with natural spirals. It has a discordant voice. It is gentle toward other animals but unfriendly toward its own kind. Nobody has ever captured the full-grown animal alive.

Pliny[20] calls the unicorn a fierce animal with the head of a stag, a body like a horse, feet like those of an elephant and a tail like that of a boar; it has a deep bellow and a single black horn three feet long. Aristotle[21] knows that the ass of India has a horn in the middle of his forehead but adds little more of significance. He does, however, mention certain cattle of Phrygia and elsewhere[22] whose horn is attached to the skin rather than to the bone of the head, thus enabling the animal to move the horn upward and downward like the ears. Such a report may easily account for the lowering of the horn to contact water, on the medallion cited above. Aristotle[23] is also responsible for the statement that the Indian ass is known to be both single-horned and single-hoofed. The single hoof, which Ctesias also mentions, gains in significance from the authority of Aristotle; this feature is also included in the account of Aelian. We have also noted that Pliny's unicorn has feet like those of an elephant whose toes, as Aristotle[24] comments, are somewhat indistinctly defined; elsewhere[25] he adds that its toes are undivided and slightly articulated, without any nails. As awkward and incongruous as this feature of the unicorn may seem, it will be very important for our interpretation.

Solinus[26] gives us a compact statement summing up what was written by his predecessors: the unicorn is a monster, a cruel animal with a horrible bellow, a horse's body, elephant's feet, a swine's tail, a stag's head and a sharp, piercing horn in the middle

[18] *Ibid.*, XVI, 20.
[19] Cf. the horn and other features of the unicorn on the Proto-Attic amphora of Eleusis (*Berytus*, XIV, 1961, Pl. XIV, 2).
[20] *NH* VIII, 76.
[21] *De part. animal.*, 663a25. He adds that it is fitting for a solid hooved animal to have one horn.
[22] *Hist. animal.*, 517a25; Ettinghausen, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
[23] *Ibid.*, 499b15.
[24] *Ibid.*, 497b23.
[25] *Ibid.*, 517a32.
[26] *Polyhist.* (trans. Arthur Golding), LXIV.

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of his forehead; he cannot be caught alive. As Shepard[27] remarks, the animal, in its later history, was purged of its evil features because they were inconsistent with the unicorn of the Bible. Apollonius of Tyana[28] claims that he had seen the unicorn but was nevertheless sceptical of the reports he had heard about the Indian goblet. Oppian[29] refers to oxen with solid hoofs and a heavy horn in the middle of the forehead. This report is much nearer to the Greek and Mesopotamian versions, as we find them in artifacts, hence we may surmise he had little faith in the tales about the Indian ass. Caesar[30] mentions the beast of the Hercynean forest, with the body of a stag and a long, straight horn issuing from its brow; the top branches of the horn were spread out like open hands. One might assume that the peoples north of the Alps, well acquainted with the horns of the stag, drew this feature from their hunting experience, but the horns of the stag are too common in the symbolism of the heavens to encourage the belief that a unicorn with antlers was ever seen by a particular person or people. Many of these symbols, whose original pattern is grounded in experience, have departed so far from the original aspect and combined with so many other features that it is difficult to harmonize the symbolical significance with the original impression; the two belong on different planes of awareness. The awkwardness of trying to find both on the same plane is especially apparent in the artifact.

The stag, whether a unicorn or not, plays a stellar role as a symbolic animal. It can even take the place of the eagle as the arch enemy of the serpent,[31] and in this role we are told he can ferret out his prey either by sucking in his breath over the enemy's hide-out or drive it out with water gushed from his mouth.[32] Like the

[27] *The Lore of the Unicorn*, London, 1930, p. 39. The tendency to purge animal and divine figures of the evil in their nature is characteristic of later religious developments, especially Zoroastrianism; still others may lose all trace of goodness. The original unicorn was ambivalent in nature.

[28] Philostratus, *Vita*, III, 2.

[29] *Cynegetica*, II, 96.

[30] *De bello gall*, VI, 26. He curiously calls it an ox with the figure of a stag. For references to the unicorn, later than the *Physiologus*, consult Guy de Tervarent, *Attributs et symboles dans l'art profane*, Geneva, 1959, p. 235–41.

[31] S. Cammann, *Ars Orientalis*, II, 1957, p. 9. The fish may be substituted for the snake.

[32] R. Ettinghausen in *Late Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Albert Mathias Friend Jr.*, Princeton, 1955, p. 272–5. A good example may be seen in the mosaic in the Great Palace in Constantinople (*JWarb*, V, 1942, Pl. 11a).

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PLATE II

From P. Lebel: Catalogue des Collections archeologiques de Besançon, Pl. LIV.

BRONZE UNICORN BULL IN BESANÇON

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unicorn the stag, which Cammann[33] claims may mean a horned lunar animal in opposition to the sun bird, represented a force to counteract poisons. This animal can serve both as a unicorn, in which case the horn is lunar, and as a symbol of the sun.[34] One of the earliest references to the stag unicorn comes to us from Megasthenes.[35]

The Greek artist, especially after the archaic period, was not inclined to present in his art such composite monsters as we find on Chinese bronze vessels or among Hindu temple sculptures. The Medusa, very popular with the archaic artist, is a much earlier symbol of the same phenomenon which produced the unicorn. This fact may account in part for the lack of unicorns in Greek art; we must also remember that reports about the composite one-horned animal appear comparatively late in Greek literature when the Medusa was already strongly entrenched in art and thus served as a substitute. The reports about the composite monster, like the tradition of the Medusa, apparently came from the east.

The best example of a Greek unicorn, one which has received little notice, is a bronze bull in Besancon (Plate II),[36] which has a short, cone-like horn jutting out from the centre of his forehead, in addition to the two normal horns at the sides. Below the central horn is a sun-whorl whose significance is beyond question,[37] all of which means that the sun and moon have been combined in the

[33] *Loc. cit.*, p. 14, 33 (note 26).

[34] Kaiser Wilhelm II, *Studien zur Gorgo*, Berlin, 1936, p. 25–6, fig. 4. The reborn sun comes to light after Perseus cuts off the head of the Medusa or eclipse monster.

[35] Steier in Pauly-Wiss, *RE*, XXXII, 1935 (Nashorn), p. 1783.

[36] P. Lebel, *Catalogue des collections archéologiques de Besancon* (Les bronzes figurés), Paris, 1959, Pls. LIV–LV. The horn is similar to that of the bull of the Shalmaneser obelisk relief (J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures*, Princeton, 1954, 352, III). If the three animals here presented in a row are a part of the tribute of the Musri, it seems strange that the artist should add symbols on the heads, symbols which are used in Mesopotamia to denote a religious significance (L. Curtius, *Torso*, Stuttgart, 1958, p. 205, fig. 42). It may be that the artist copied the figures from another work, and if this is true, the original probably did not portray any known animal such as the rhinoceros or the hippopotamus; the bodies are much the same, while the distinction is emphasized by the attributes on the heads. The text below, which Olmstead (*History of Assyria*, New York, 1923, p. 151) labels a 'badly garbled annals edition' can be of little help. The horn of the bull is grooved, a feature the artist had no reason to add in depicting a rhinoceros.

[37] H. J. Cantor, *JNES*, VI, 1947, p. 250–67; A. J. Arkell, *ibid.*, VII, 1948, p. 52; D. M. A. Bate, *ibid.*, IX, 1950, p. 53–4, Pl. II; A. Vollgraff-Roes, *ibid.*, XII, 1953, p. 43.

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symbolism of the head. Late examples include a griffon unicorn rising from a cornucopia on a Greek gem[38] and a horse unicorn on a sarcophagus in Verona.[39] In Mesopotamian art von Oppenheim[40] found a relief at Tell Halaf on which a palm with Ionic volutes stands between what he calls two gazelles; from their heads projects a single horn. There are also one-horned animals on cylinder seals, some of which we can be fairly certain about,[41] while others cannot be so easily identified.[42] Cones, while they can ultimately be traced to the same phenomenon as the unicorn, do not belong in the same category.[43]

We must call attention to an illustration on an Egyptian papyrus[44] in the British Museum, showing a lion and a one-horned bull or ass sitting upright and playing at a gaming board (Fig. 1). Far from being a stroke of humour it presents the lion as the sun contesting against the unicorn for high stakes in the sky, a contest which the lion will eventually win, as on the Persepolis relief. The horn, it will be noted, is black. The gaming board, which also appears in later sagas, is simply another way of presenting the contest between the sun and his antagonist.

We hear little about the unicorn as an animal in India, except for the famous wild ass reported by the Greeks and the Karkadann in Indian Muslim art.[45] This does not mean, of course, that it is absent from Indian tradition; it simply means that it appears in

[38] M. Somerville, *Engraved Gems*, Phila., 1901, p. 63, 565.
[39] S. Reinach, *Rép. des reliefs*, III, 438, 2.
[40] *Tell Halaf*, London & New York, 1933, p. 162, Pl. XXIVB.
[41] H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals*, London, 1939, Pl. XXXIg.
[42] *Ibid.*, Pl. XXXIa.
[43] The one-horned bull of Persepolis reliefs, presented with the attacking lion, has been the subject of much controversy and speculation. E. Schrader (*SBBerl*, 1892, p. 573–81) was the first, so far as I know, to contend that the single horn is due to the limitations of the artist, but since there is a bull on another Persian relief (E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis* I, Chicago, 1953, Pl. 47B), this argument loses conviction. The one-horned bull (Schmidt, *ibid.*, Pl. 20), like the Shalmaneser example, probably is a unicorn, in spite of the missing grooves. C. G. E. Bunt (*Antiquity*, IV, 1930, p. 437) calls it the victory of the summer's sun over the sun god of spring, but why should a scene whose meaning is adverse to man's welfare be presented so frequently and prominently? I suggest a victory of the leonine sun over an astronomical adversary. The same type of bull with wings, one marching behind the other (*JNES*, IX, 1950, Pl. III) is presented in a processional frieze. A similar struggle between the lion and the one-horned bull appears on a relief in the Syracuse Museum (G. and V. de Miré, *Sicile grecque*, Paris, 1955, Pl. 24).
[44] C. G. E. Bunt, *Antiquity*, IV, 1930, p. 433, fig. 11. The drawing is dated about 1200 B.C.
[45] Ettinghausen, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

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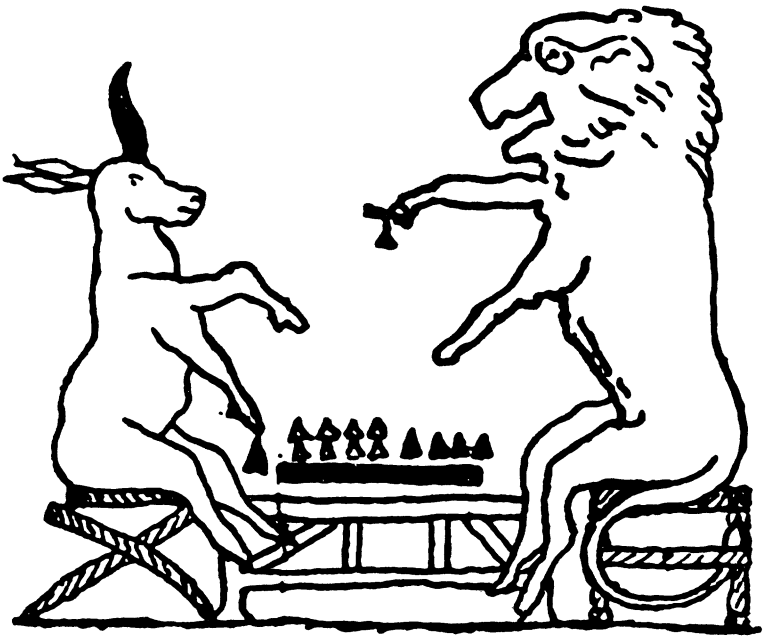

the form of the kirttimukha, the mask corresponding to the Greek Medusa. We should add that Vishnu himself has been called a unicorn.[46]

The Chinese version or Chi-lin occurs in art, but more frequently in literature. We learn that he has a horn projecting from his forehead but, in contrast to the western version, the tip of the horn is fleshy, a feature which renders him helpless as a fighter. His skin is white, red, yellow, blue and black, the yellow predominating beneath the belly (it will be noticed that here the colours mentioned by Ctesias and Aelian are included). He stands twelve cubits high. He has feet like those of a horse, with round hoofs, his pace is regular as are his turnings and returnings.[47] His voice is like the sound of bells or other related musical instruments. He is usually represented in bronze, bearing a crescent moon among the clouds on his back.[48] He is reputed to be able to walk

[46] E. W. Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1915, p. 206.
[47] Yoshihiko Izushi, *Memoirs of the Research Dept. of the Toyo Bunko*, No. 9, Tokyo, 1937, p. 82. He rejects the giraffe as a prototype (p. 85).
[48] O. Shepard, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

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on water as well as on land.[49] He is a very gentle creature who knows the difference between good and evil, he will not even tread on the grass and steps along very carefully lest he harm any other creature, large or small. In diet he is a vegetarian. He is a solitary animal, never mingling promiscuously with another species. Some illustrations present a curious composite quadruped with protruding eyes, a goat's beard and short wings.[50] He is reckoned among the four sacred animals of China, the others being the phoenix, the dragon and the tortoise. As a representative of hairy animals he was born from yang.[51]

Like the phoenix, the Chinese unicorn is a benevolent creature that appears in times of prosperity, when the emperor reigns wisely over his subjects. He is said to be a portent of good fortune in the offing. When Pan Ku was at work as the architect of the universe, the four sacred animals were his companions and became the progenitors of the animal kingdom.[52] The unicorn appeared before the death of Confucius and, for the last time, before the death of the sage. Another report states that the mother of Confucius became pregnant when she stepped into the tracks of the animal. Although the female is mentioned, the name of the Chi-lin includes both male and female which means that the animal was sometimes thought of as bisexual; he comes from afar, probably from above, after long intervals of time.[53] In times of war when men are cruel and evil, when they kill pregnant animals or slaughter their young, the unicorn will not appear. He may also be incarnate in an outstanding personality, one who will play the role of a messiah or deliverer for oppressed mankind.[54]

After this review of the features and attributes of the unicorn,

[49] V. R. Burkhardt, *Chinese Creeds and Customs*, II, Hong Kong, 1956, p. 78.
[50] W. M. Hawley, *Chinese Art Symbols*, Hollywood, 1945, No. 32.
[51] J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, II, Cambridge, 1956, p. 269.
[52] V. R. Burkhardt, *op. cit.*, I, p. 138.
[53] O. Shepard, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
[54] *Ibid.*, p. 96. Occasionally we find a writer who believes the Chinese unicorn probably did exist (S. C. Nott, *Chinese Culture in the Arts*, New York, 1946, p. 76), and one tells us it may have been some rare species of quadruped, now extinct, or possibly a giraffe (C. A. S. Williams, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives*, New York, 1960, p. 409–10; E. O. Reischauer and J. F. Fairbank, *A History of East Asian Civilization*, I, Boston, 1960, p. 322); still another claims it had something of the stag in its background (Yoshihiko Izushi, *op. cit.*, p. 90; cf. the unusual statement of S. Cammann, *American Anthropological Ass. Memoirs*, LV, 1953, No. 75, p. 211); see also K. M. Ball, *Decorative Motives of Oriental Art*, London and New York, 1927, p. 33.

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we are ready for a significant question: was the unicorn an animal we can trace to a particular species existing in the present or past? Historically or scientifically no one has ever given us an account of the phoenix, the dragon or unicorn that would encourage a modern zoologist to place one of them in a dependable classification, and so we have been content to think of them as mythological creatures. We are willing to admit that many of the features of the phoenix were derived from known birds,[55] that, as Izushi (p. 109) puts it, 'some actual tangible things exist at the very basis of the origin of the imagination,' but the imagination of early man has pieced together a pattern of varied features from the members of the bird kingdom to represent something more symbolically meaningful. The most striking features of a number of birds have been joined to convey what the Chinese saw in the sun, the great source of light and life, but such a bird would appear very awkward, if not incredible, in our everyday life.

The same is true of the dragon; where could the Chinese have found a creature more symbolically capable of rising up from the pools and streams of the earth to become part of the rain-making clouds of heaven? The dragon[56] and the unicorn, as animals of concrete experience, are as incongruous as the phoenix. The tortoise, however, had everything the symbolist required to represent the patient, steady earth at the base of the cosmic column, hence there was no need for the imagination to add, detract or alter. Since three of the above mentioned animals are often described in cosmic terms,[57] it is likely that the unicorn, so closely associated with them, also has something in common with a cosmic phenomenon.

Whether we consider the Medieval, the Greek, the Islamic or

[55] Izushi (*op. cit.*, p. 106) claims that the peacock added an important element to the makeup of the phoenix. M. N. Hachisuka (*JRAS*, 1924, p. 585–9) identifies it with the ocellated pheasant. In ancient descriptions it has a cock's head, a snake's neck, a swallow's chin, a tortoise's back and a fish's tail. It has five colours and stands about six feet high (p. 585). Such a creature is as fantastic as the Chinese unicorn.

[56] L. C. Hopkins (*JRAS*, 1931, p. 806) claims that when the Chinese of the Shang period wanted to represent the dragon, he used the alligator as a model.

[57] Izushi (*op. cit.*, p. 101) described the phoenix as having a head shaped like Heaven, eyes shaped like the sun, a back like the moon, wings like the wind and feet like the earth. Like the winged sun disc of the Near East it comprises the bright, round sun, the movement of vital breath it creates and a support on the earth in the form of a column.

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Chinese unicorn, it is impossible to conjure up in our mind an adequate image of a living and moving animal. Where could we find an example uniting in its makeup the attributes of cloud, wind and fire? Where can we point to a quadruped with a single horn, rounded hoofs and wings? Where can we find a four-footed creature, regardless of its size, walking as easily on water as on land? How can we conceive of an animal as innocently benevolent as the Chinese version, that knows when man is acting in harmony with his world? A beast of five, or even three different colours on his body or horn must have presented a bizarre pattern in any landscape! How did he manage to bend or lower his horn for water-conning? Freaks of nature were doubtless born with one horn, like that mentioned by Plutarch,[58] but no scientist ever thought of ascribing a horn in the centre of the forehead to a whole species.

If the single horn is not a sufficient strain on our experience, the grooves of the horn certainly overtax it; and these grooves are not concentric rings like those of a tree, but a continuous spiral running from the base to the tip.[59] The three-legged ass, with which the unicorn has been identified, is the most preposterous of all likenesses; the giraffe as the original model is well nigh ridiculous.[60] That the rhinoceros figured in the composition of one version of the unicorn is obvious, but the name of the former implies that its horn, which is not of the same substance as the bovine horn, is on his nose, not in the centre of his forehead, as the ancients realized.[61] The fact that the unicorn, like the phoenix, was at times regarded as bisexual is a reminder of the bisexual character of the cosmic column with its hermaphroditic divinity; it definitely belongs in the category of Pegasos, the griffon, the gorgon, the sphinx and other imaginary beasts conjured up in the rich imagination of early man to deal more effectively and symbolically with the ambivalent forces operating in his environment — the unicorn was never seen as an animal of any known species![62]

[58] *Pericles*, 6.

[59] From the standpoint of zoology a winged animal with a grooved horn is difficult to explain (Ettinghausen: *op. cit.*, p. 4).

[60] Izushi, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[61] Paus., 9, 21, 2. The horn of the rhinoceros is made up of agglutinated hair (Ettinghausen, *op. cit.*, p. 53).

[62] Cuvier pointed out that an animal with a cleft foot could hardly have a horn in the middle of his forehead (P. Lum, *Fabulous Beasts* London, 1952, p. 58; W. Ley, *The Lungfish, the Dodo and the Unicorn*, New York, 1948, p. 29). The skele-

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There was perhaps no astronomical phenomenon more startling to primitive and early civilized man than the total solar eclipse. Without any warning he noticed an eerie and untimely darkness settling over the land, and when he looked at the sun, he saw a menacing dark orb eating into the solar disc until the blackness covered the whole central area of light; from the edge of the dark circle a desperate flare of light, which in a partial eclipse took on the form of a ring, darted out with a feathery texture for some distance, so much more spectacular in contrast to the dark centre. This effect Assyrian and Egyptian pictured as the wings of a great bird, since the flare tends to jut out farther on two opposite sides.[63] The Chinese also developed the bird with outstretched wings in their image of the sun.[64] Likewise, in due time, came the phoenix, the garuda of India and other fanciful birds to represent the sun itself.

During the total eclipse the light of the sun grows so weak that cocks begin to crow and birds sing their evening song. The cone-shaped shadow projected to the earth during such an eclipse can extend over an area from fifty to one hundred miles. Around the edge of the dark disc appear rosy-coloured protuberances[65] — and all this is visible to the naked eye! Three colours, easily distinguishable in the brightness, can be associated with this phenomenon. Added to the white, black and red one can also note two more salient colours in the landscape covered by the shadow: a rich yellow in the sky above the horizon, and a deep blue on any hills that rise up to meet the yellow of the horizon, are clearly visible.[66] All in all, this must have been a spectacle to kindle the imagination of early man to fantastic lengths, the effects of which we have not yet begun to interpret.

That early peoples thought of heavenly bodies as whirling through space is well known; the sun whorl is a symbol of this kind of motion. The shadow projected by one of these bodies must

ton of the unicorn, so-called, is not at all convincing (R. Lewinsohn, *Animals, Men and Myths*, New York, 1954, p. 120, fig. 31). K. M. Ball (*Decorative Motives of Oriental Art*, London and New York, 1927, p. 40) claims it was derived from a real creature.

[63] J. N. Lockyer, *The Chemistry of the Sun*, London, 1887, fig. 128.

[64] C. Hentze, *Bronzegeraet, Kultbauten, Religion im aeltesten China der Shang-Zeit*, Antwerp, 1951, fig. 73.

[65] S. A. Mitchell, *Eclipses of the Sun*, New York, 1924, plate facing p. 130. This illustration includes the so-called eagle prominence.

[66] *Ibid.*, plate facing p. 210.

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also necessarily rotate, an inference which resulted in the concept of the whirling vortex indispensable for creation, also manifest in the grooved horn of the unicorn. The first reaction of the primitive to a total solar eclipse must have been one of fright and terror, an attitude that clung to the mind of the common people for centuries. Consternation at such a sight no doubt led to the notion that the sun was being swallowed by an evil monster, evidence for which can be found in the plastic arts. With the advance of astronomy and a knowledge of the relative motions of the sun and moon, especially among the learned, the terror roused by this experience must have moderated, but the image of the monster remained. With the passing of the shadow from the face of the sun there was great rejoicing at the re-emergence and resurrection of light. When it was realized that the moon, which played a beneficient role in the fertility of the earth,[67] was not a monster swallowing the sun, people thought of the two bodies as exerting some mutually beneficient influence on each other; the same influence was extended through the shadow to the earth.[68] Shadows, we know, were assumed to contain the vital substance of a living being,[69] and heavenly bodies were also living beings as vital as the earth itself.

Solar eclipses were reliably recorded in Assyria, beginning in 763 B.C., and we may be quite sure that the phenomenon was the subject of observation and speculation long before that date.[70] In Egypt no mention was made of the eclipses, although the sun disc with outstretched wings points to an awareness of their meaning. In China the earliest solar eclipse was officially noted in 1217 B.C., although its full meaning was not appreciated before *c.* 20 B.C.[71] Needham[72] implies the Chinese were aware of the lunar shadow;

[67] Varro, *de ling. lat.* V, 69; K. Reinhard, *Kosmos und Sympathie — Neue Untersuchungen ueber Poseidonios*, Munich, 1926, p. 176, 1.

[68] 'In India, a barren tree will bear if a naked man cuts a piece off it on the day of an eclipse' (W. Crooke, *Folklore*, 24, 1913, p. 248).

[69] P. L. Renouf, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* (Hibbert Lectures 1879), London, 1907, p. 150–3.

[70] S. A. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[71] J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, III, Cambridge, 1959, p. 410f. After 841 solar eclipses are reliable in dating (E. O. Reischauer and F. J. Fairbank, *op. cit.*, p. 39). A solar eclipse was evidently recorded in 2136 B.C. (T. von Oppolzer, *SBBerl.* 1880, p. 182). According to A. Forke (*The World-Conception of the Chinese*, London, 1925, p. 8) solar and lunar eclipses were regularly registered in China, beginning in the eighth century B.C. The nature of the solar eclipse was known in Han times (p. 98).

[72] *Op. cit.*, III, p. 417.

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this is also recorded for the Mesopotamians. It appears probable that the annual eclipse of 478 B.C. recorded by Herodotus,[73] is the same phenomenon as represented by the unicorn which appeared in China before the death of Confucius (551–478 B.C.).[74] We have good reason for assuming that the unicorn with his grooved horn was a symbol for the solar eclipse and its shadow extended to the earth.

In Indian literature of a very early date we find a description of a solar eclipse,[75] a statement perhaps the oldest of its kind on record. The monster Svarbhânu, the later Rahu,[76] had a long tail like that of a typical dragon.

Many reports about eclipses interpret these phenomena as portents of evil or as a sign of disapproval on the part of the gods of the behaviour of men, but we are also made aware of other opinions. The majority or the common people continued to interpret them adversely, even after the astronomers had learned more about the movements and conjunctions of the two heavenly bodies. They shot arrows at the monster, they produced frightening sounds to drive him from his prey. In China the mandarins had to save the sun or moon according to old established custom, even though they put no faith in the procedure.[77] When the officials disapproved of the emperor and his behaviour, all eclipses were meticulously recorded to enlist the support of the lower classes in the official disapproval of the government; when they were satisfied with the emperor and his policies, they sometimes neglected to record an eclipse.[78]

[73] VII, 37. Herodotus claims the eclipse occurred before the battle of Salamis (480), but no eclipse was visible to the army in that year (G. Sarton, *A History of Science* I, Cambridge, 1952, p. 309). The historian may have pre-dated the eclipse of 478 (W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* II, Oxford, 1936, p. 145; for possibilities of an eclipse visible both in China and Asia Minor see T. von Oppolzer, *Canon der Finsternisse*, Vienna, 1887, chart 36).

[74] O. Shepard, *op. cit.*, p. 94–5.

[75] *The Hymns of the Rigveda* (Trans. by R. T. H. Griffith), V, 40. The sun is described as pierced with darkness while all creatures are in a state of bewilderment. He appeals for help and eventually the demon of darkness is routed — with the aid of the Brahman.

[76] A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (Harvard Oriental Series XXXI), Cambridge, 1925, p. 235. Florance Waterbury (*Early Chinese Symbols and Literature*; *Vestiges and Speculations*, New York, 1942, p. 71) believes the dragon was originally a symbol of lightning.

[77] L. Wieger, *Moral Tenets and Customs in China*, Ho-Kien-fu, 1913, p. 448.

[78] H. Bielenstein, *BMFEA* XXII, 1950, p. 128f. The criticism of the government came from the officials, not from the common people (p. 137).

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Confucianism also tended to sacrifice scientific research to ancient custom and moral precept. We are told about the life-long struggle of a Han scientist, Wang Ch'ung (A.D. 27–100), against the popular notion that eclipses were warnings despatched by Heaven to an emperor of impious behaviour.[79] Seneca[80] ridicules the interpretation of a solar eclipse as a frightful portent. In the course of the aforementioned eclipse, recorded by Herodotus, the historian reports that Xerxes and his men were very much alarmed when day turned into night. Xerxes turned to the Magi for an explanation. He was told that the phenomenon portended destruction for the Greek cities, and they added: 'The sun foretells for them and the moon for us.' In view of the fact that the sun played an important role in the Persian religion we can only regard this statement as one dictated by expedient policy. As the sun went down into dark destruction and was later restored to life, the eclipse, whether the sun was darkened by the dragon or the lunar shadow, came to be invested with ambivalent values.

Let us now consider how the habits and attributes ascribed to the unicorn can be equated with the whole manifestation of the eclipse, including the sun, the moon, corona and shadow. First, the colours associated with the animal by Ctesias and Aelian were red, white and black, all of which are to be observed in the red proturbances, the white corona and the black moon and shadow; the Chinese have included yellow and blue which appear in the horizon and landscape, for those standing within the shadow's circumference. The end of the shadow can very well be likened to a round, uncloven foot, like that of an elephant, it can pass over water as easily as land, it is harmless to animals, insects and grass. The antlers of the Karkadann and the stag, which we have seen on the Etruscan vase, are a natural development in symbolism from the projections of the corona; the fire and the wind in the makeup of the unicorn correspond to the fire of the sun and the whirling cloud of the shadow; the tapering horn is of the same shape as the cone-shaped shadow, and the grooves indicate the whirling of the moon and its appendage.[81] The fact that a shadow penetrates water no doubt gave rise to the moveable horn and its water-

[79] H. G. Callis, *China Confucian and Communist*, New York, 1959, p. 132.
[80] *De benef.* V, 6.
[81] S. A. Mitchell (*op. cit.*, p. 321) observes that when the moon hurled itself before the solar disc, it 'seemed to go round like an upper mill-stone'.

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conning. The medicinal and prophylactic properties of the horn must have been borrowed from ancient notions about the moon; the same reason may be given for its fertility (e.g. the mother of Confucius). Like the unicorn, the shadow is solitary and descends from the heavens above, appearing only after long intervals of time; like the eclipse monster (the Medusa), the unicorn frequently has an open mouth. The connection between Artemis, the virgin goddess, and the moon may account for the animal's preference for female chastity, a feature that brings to mind the drinking horn of Arthurian lore for testing the chastity of women.[82] The Christian interpretation to the effect that it represents the unity of the Father and the Son is one of the most cogent parallels with the horn or shadow and its connection with the sun.[83]

Another statement, coming from Cosmas Indicopleustes, mentions a habit of the unicorn which is incredible in the animal kingdom but very easily accomplished by the lunar shadow:[84] to avoid being taken by the hunters the unicorn will run to a precipice and hurl himself into the depths below, falling in such a way that the horn would sustain the shock of the fall and allow him to escape unharmed. A shadow of conical shape, falling over the edge of a precipice, strikes the earth below with its tip and moves along unperturbed. When Caesar describes the strange animals he has never seen, he includes a type of elk[85] whose legs are minus joints and ligatures, a report probably influenced by rumours about the unicorn. An animal equipped with such legs is, of course, impossible, but as a living embodiment of the lunar shadow it carries some conviction. The Chinese make more sense when they assert that the unicorn presumably comes from Heaven.

Let us now turn to an example in European tradition which deals with the manifestation of the solar eclipse in the form of a stag unicorn like that mentioned by Caesar. In the *Mabinogian*[86] we learn about an adventure of Peredur with a stag as swift as the swiftest bird, with a single horn growing from its forehead, as long as a spear shaft and as sharp as anything can be. The stag fed

[82] Jean Marx, *La légende Arthurienne et le graal*, Paris, 1952, p. 124.
[83] Cf. *Luke* I, 35: 'and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.'
[84] *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* (ed. E. O. Winstedt), Cambridge, 1909, 444B–C, p. 350.
[85] *De bell. gall.*, VI, 27.
[86] G. and T. Jones, *The Mabinogian*, London and New York, 1957, p. 225.

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on the tops of the trees, which means it must have been much taller than any normal stag to reach up to a point where the lunar shadow would naturally fall. It put to death every animal it met in the forest; it drained the water from the fish pond so that the fish died of exposure. The lapdog of the empress raised the stag, and when it charged, Peredur stepped aside, but seconds later he cut off its head as it passed the second time. A lady on horse-back then picked up the lapdog as well as the stag's head and the collar of gold that was around the animal's neck. Why should a stag wear a collar of gold unless as a survival of the sun's corona during a solar eclipse? What is meant by the lapdog and the lady on horse-back we cannot say, but the long, sharp horn and the gold collar of the stag make Peredur a Celtic version of Perseus cutting off the head of the Medusa.[87]

With the exception of the unicorn's voice which is reported, among the Chinese, as musical or like the tinkling of little bells, nearly every feature of the single-horned creature can be paralleled with the lunar shadow surmounted by the sun and moon. As long as we cling to the belief that it is derived from a certain species of animal, interpretation can only reach a certain point; as soon as we realize that such a creature could not move or function as a quadruped, that its attributes and habits have little to do with any known animal, we must turn elsewhere to explore the path of early man's imagination. Moreover, since the unicorn is part of the heritage of a number of peoples, we must look to a common denominator of human experience, and where can we find an area more common than astronomy? Where can we find an area that called for more respect than the dwelling place of the gods on high? The connection thus established between heaven and earth is not a static one, as the grooves of the horn indicate. If the force or influence involved descends from on high, the unicorn is related to Hermes

[87] The ring is also a very old symbol of the sun, derived from its circle of light around the dark moon during an annulated eclipse. It could be used as an amulet; it was placed in the hand of the sun god Shamash (E. A. W. Budge, *Amulets and Superstitions*, London, 1930, p. 291). It also appears between the wings of the sun bird, on emblems of Assyria and Persia. In these cases the sun disc has been perforated to give the appearance of a ring through which the light of the sky can shine (S. Cammann, *Ars Orientalis*, II, 1957, p. 10); the Assyrian Assur and the Persian Ahura Mazda appear within the ring. We recall also the gold rings the people of India, according to Aelian, placed around the drinking horn fashioned from the horn of the unicorn. Later the ring emerges as an instrument of magic in the sagas of Siegfried and King Arthur.

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who also descends along the cosmic column, for the lunar shadow is another form of the column in question; in China it would mean that the unicorn descends along the same column the dragon ascends from the pools and streams of the earth.

Where does the unicorn fit into the evolution of the solar eclipse pattern projected by the imagination of early man? Obviously the dragon attempting to devour the sun is the earliest construct, one that has survived in the mask: the kirttimukha of India, the t'ao t'ieh of China, the Medusa of Greece (perhaps also the Khumbaba of Mesopotamia and Bes of Egypt). When the facts of astronomy were explored, the cone-shaped lunar shadow gave rise to the grooved horn and the unicorn. Eventually the shadow was replaced by the Messiah, such figures as Krishna, Mithra, Moses, Christ, Achilles, Siegfried and King Arthur, but vestiges of the dragon, the unicorn and the shadow still clung to the anthropomorphic image.[88]

[88] This theme must be reserved for a later discussion. See my article in *Folklore*, 74, 1963, p. 387–95.

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